

News

LONG QUEUE:

Visitors queuing up by the door of the clinic for registration on Monday.



Patient numbers up after charity show

Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution draws 1,000 people a day after Sunday's TV show

SHE had waited for more than five hours to see a physician.

But Madam Ho Mei Hong, 40, who is unemployed, was prepared for the wait at the Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution (STCMI) yesterday.

She had watched the clinic's first televised charity show on Sunday and was curious to find out if the physicians were really that good.

And she wasn't alone.

At least 800 other patients were also waiting for a consultation.

According to the clinic, the number of patients has jumped to at least 800 for the past few days from about 600 daily before the show.

"I've been waiting for five hours, but I'd expected to spend half a day at the clinic anyway as it seemed really popular," said Madam Ho.

It was her first time at the charity clinic, which provides free consultations and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) to the public.

All visitors are welcomed regardless of race, religion, nationality or income level.

Sunday's televised show was organised to raise funds for the expansion of the clinic's current premises at Chin Swee Road.

On Monday, a day after the show, as many as 1,000 people thronged the clinic and a few hundred people had to be turned away.

Many were first-timers who had heard about the clinic through the charity show.

STCMI's chairman, Mr Lim Guan Lee, 60, said he had anticipated an increase in numbers, but did not expect such a huge jump.

Monday turned out to be a messy affair for the clinic. There were bottlenecks with many regulars complaining about the long queues because it did not differentiate between first-time patients and regular ones.

Although the two queues have now been sorted out, the crowd remains a problem.

According to staff there, first-timers can wait up to two hours just to register.

Waiting to see a physician can take another two hours.

Heavy workload

All this is putting a strain on the clinic's 23 paid physicians as well as the other staff.

"The physicians work so hard; they often don't have much time to rest or eat. They may also have to work longer shifts without earning extra pay," Mr Lim said.

The number of visitors does not seem to be dwindling either.

"When we turn away people, we ask them to come back again the next day, but every day is just as busy," he said.

But Mr Lim said the clinic has no plans to bring in more physicians and staff as the building has no more space for more consultation rooms.

He will continue to monitor the situation and ensure the crowd is manageable, he said.

Still, patients The New Paper spoke to yesterday were willing to wait.

Regular patient Teo Keng Lim, 66, a retiree, said he was not deterred by the crowd.

He said that while he usually needed to wait only 30 minutes to see a physician, he had to wait about 3½ hours yesterday.



"I can't do anything about the queue, but I will keep coming back for the powerful medicine," he said in Mandarin, gesturing to his bottle of medicine.

He said he has been getting better since he first consulted the physicians at STCMI seven months ago.

"For three years, I went to a local hospital for my heart problem, but I didn't get well. I was frail and depending on crutches to walk," he said.

"But then I came here, and now I'm very healthy, and I can walk perfectly fine. I even cycle to the clinic three times a week."

A 50-year-old housewife, who wanted to be known only as Madam Chan, was convinced after watching the charity show that the physicians at the clinic delivered results.

"I've been waiting to see the doctor for almost four hours, but I don't mind waiting because a good diagnosis is more important," she said.

She was there for a general check-up.

While medical services are provided free-of-charge at the clinic, visitors can choose to make a donation at a donation box found at the back of the clinic.

Mr Teo said: "I didn't come here because it was free. I came here for the medicine."

"I will definitely donate something. It is because of the physicians here that I got well."

The clinic has raised \$7.26 million as of Tuesday night, according to Mr Lim.

—Vinna Yip, newsroom intern

CROWDED: Visitors waiting outside the crowded clinic's main entrance on Monday.

TNP PICTURES: KELVIN CHNG